

www.galaxyimrj.com

ISSN:2278-9529

# GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Vol. 3, Issue - V September 2014



Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor: Madhuri Bite

**About Us:** <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/about-us/>

**Archive:** <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/archive/>

**Contact Us:** <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/contact-us/>

**Editorial Board:** <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/editorial-board/>

**Submission:** <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/submission/>

**FAQ:** <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/faq/>

## Theme of Sisterhood in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

**Kavita**

University Research Scholar  
Kurukshetra University  
Kurukshetra

A great poet, essayist, and novelist Alice Walker (b. 1944) is a renowned face on the literary stage of America. Though Walker is an important part of American literature, still, she more specifically belongs to the Afro-American literature. Walker has always been attracted towards the problems of the oppressed and the downtrodden. She has been an active reformist and social worker and has been a part of various reforms and movements organised in favour of the oppressed or the 'social outcasts'. Being an Afro-American writer it is, but, natural that she vividly represents the culture and the social life of the 'Black' people. But even while portraying the 'blacks', she is more concerned with the portrayal of the 'Black Women'. Her focus or orientation has always been the 'double torture' faced by the black women. Along with facing 'Racism', they are a prey to 'Sexism' or gender discrimination too. This 'double oppression' in the hands of the 'whites' as well as the 'blacks' has remained a major area of thrust in Walker's fiction. Thus Alice Walker becomes an important part and parcel of 'Black Feminism' too. She has been credited for introducing the word 'Womanist' in Afro-American feminism. She portrays the economic hardships and the struggles faced by the African-American women. The dominant themes that have again and again occurred in her novels are racism, sexism, violence, rape, isolation, and a disruption of stereo-typical gender-roles. She has been adamant on turning upside down these traditional and normative gender-specific roles.

Alice Walker started her writing career with some miscellaneous poems, short- stories and essays and then she opted for writing novels. Her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* came in 1970; second was *Meridian* in 1976; but her writing career took flight with her famous as well as controversial novel *The Color Purple* in 1982. It was with this novel that Alice Walker came into limelight and established her literary reputation. The novel received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983 and also the National Book Award for Fiction in the same year. Like the other novels of Walker, this too has a female protagonist, who suffers terribly for being a 'black'; and a 'black woman' too. The locale of the novel is the rural 'South' during the early 1900s. The protagonist and the chief narrator of the novel, Celie writes down the story of her life from her young age of 14 to the time she gets old. The novel spans a time period of thirty long unbearable and transitional years in the life of the innocent and naive Celie. Walker very pictorially writes down the story of Celie, who has been a continuous victim of the patriarchal society of the Blacks. She has been, throughout her life, considered as an object of sexual gratification by the unthinkable men she came in contact with. At the very outset of the novel, Celie is shown to be raped and continuously abused and degraded by the man whom she calls 'father'. Later she becomes an object for her husband too, who marries her, on account of getting a cow along with her, and also for taking care of his unruly children. She is always treated as a 'commodity'. When her husband Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ agrees to marry her, he beforehand confirms that would he get the cow if he marries Celie, that her father had promised to give – "That cow still coming?" (Walker 13). Celie's father too described Celie as some sort of domestic animal which is looked at, only from a utilitarian purpose. When Celie's father puts forward the marriage proposal to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, he describes Celie as :

She ugly. He say. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. . . . But she'll make the better wife. She ain't smart either . . . But she can work like a man. (Walker 10)

The novel shows the transition in the character of Celie, from being an uneducated, diffident, submissive, and dependent girl to an economically independent, confident, and complete woman. In the beginning Celie was the 'deprived' girl – deprived of honour, respect, love, deprived of her relations, and deprived of a 'home'. Towards the end she becomes a woman of 'possession' – possessing love, respect, honour, a family, as well as her own 'home'. At the end she is united with her long-lost sister and children as well as her love Shug Avery. Moreover at the end she is a woman who knows her 'self'. She overcomes all sorts of wrong done to her and establishes her unique identity. She is physically and spiritually emancipated. But her journey of 'self-emancipation' was not an individual effort. The transformation in Celie was possible due to some female characters, who had a special bonding with her, and always influenced and inspired her. This bonding of the female characters for the upraising and betterment of each other is termed as the bond of 'sisterhood'. The term according to Merriam – Webster dictionary means 'the close relationship among women based on shared experiences, concerns etc.', or sense of solidarity between women. This means that the women sharing a bonding need not, necessarily, be biological sisters. They can be any two or more women – a mother and daughter; a female teacher and her students; two or more friends; a mistress and her maid; two neighbours etc.

'Sisterhood' is a source of female empowerment. This bonding enables women to rely upon each other and look forward to a friendship which is ever lasting. Women who have been exploited or suppressed by the patriarchal society turn toward their alike and find in them a source of consolation and salvation. The bond of sisterhood becomes an outlet of suppressed fears and desires for victimized women.

Since women were not regarded as peers of men, they would turn to their own sex as true peers and value female friendship in their pursuit of equality and individuality. (HE 202)

Celie was always turned down by the male characters that came in close relation to her. They never acknowledged her virtues and qualities, rather always demotivated her. Due to them she could never realise her talents, inclinations, likes – dislikes. Her identity could never develop as a whole. But when Shug Avery came into Celie's life, the transformation in Celie started taking place. Celie starts getting importance and priority, love as well as respect, by Shug. Shug composed a song which was solely for Celie. This was a great tribute to Celie. She felt the love that she was always deprived of. Shug also decides to stay at Albert's house until she is assured that Albert won't beat Celie any more. Shug says :

I won't leave, she say, until I know Albert won't even think about beating you. (Walker 72)

Moreover Shug tried to make Celie realise her hidden talents. This was possible only if Celie came out of the dominating and depressive atmosphere of her husband's house. So Shug decides to take Celie with her to Tennessee. This was again a major step for Celie's 'self-realisation'. When Celie goes to live with Shug in Tennessee she comes to know of her talent to stitch pants. Thus her economic career as a tailor of 'pants' begins. Becoming economically independent boosts Celie's confidence too. She establishes her company of stitching pants and names it "Folkspants, Unlimited". When she leaves Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s house she, finally, is physically as well as spiritually emancipated. Thus the bond of sisterhood provides a woman an opportunity to give special attention to one's own 'self'. All they need is to 'uphold and celebrate' their talents. Sisterhood enables women to seek power from each other. It is an :

omnipotent energy in the sharing of physical, emotional and psychic joy that empowers women to shake off "resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self- denial" [qtd. in HE 203] imposed by men. (HE 203)

Another bonding which brings forth the theme of sisterhood as a dominant theme in *The Color Purple* is Celie and her sister Nettie's bonding. Celie and Nettie are real sisters. They love and care for each other. But Celie was always disapproved by her father while Nettie was 'the gifted one'. She was allowed to continue her education on Celie's stake. Celie was forcibly withdrawn from basic school education by her father. It was Nettie who heartily tried to convince her father for Celie's education. When their father was taking Celie out of the school, Nettie was adamant: "Nettie stood there at the gate holding tight to my hand" (Walker 11). She even brought her school teacher Miss Beasley to convince their father, but all in vain. However Nettie never gave up. When Celie married Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Nettie ran away from her father's house and came to live with Celie. There, too, whenever she got a chance, she tried to make Celie conscious of her rights. She encouraged her and kept on saying "You got to fight. You got to fight" (Walker 18). Whenever she got a chance she taught Celie something or the other:

Helping me with spelling and everything else she think I need to know. No matter what happen, Nettie steady try to teach me what go on in the world. (Walker 18)

Nettie wants to teach and train Celie so that she doesn't get exploited at other's hands. Because education brings knowledge, and knowledge brings consciousness as well as power. However due to circumstances they parted and for nearly thirty years didn't hear from each other. But their love and faith for each other didn't let them part emotionally. They wrote letters to each other, with a hope that someday they would get a response from the other. This hope to unite some fateful day strengthened them spiritually. At times of crisis they made an outlet of their emotions into these unanswerable letters. And only the thought of writing to each other gave them peace and consolation. These letters were a sustenance, for their survival. The mere thought of one another re-energised both Celie and Nettie. Nettie wrote in one of the letters:

Anyway, when I don't write to you I feel as bad as I do when I don't pray, locked up in myself and choking on my own heart. (Walker 117)

Even through her letters, Nettie takes an opportunity to teach her sister Celie. She tells Celie that The Bible says that God is not a 'white' but a 'black'. That Jesus Christ's hairs were curly like their own. That the Africans were once a more advanced civilization than the Europeans. All these facts along with Shug's perspective of 'God' enhances Celie's knowledge. Here, too, sisterhood is reinforcing power into one another.

Though the theme of sisterhood is mostly apparent in these two relations – Celie/Nettie and Celie/Shug – there are many other characters that share a bond of sisterhood among them. Firstly, there is the relation of Celie with her daughter-in-law Sofia. Sofia is Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s son Harpo's wife. By portraying a character like Sofia, Walker intends to denaturalize the conventional feminine portrayal of women. Sofia is a strong and bulky girl with lot of muscular strength. She is brave and self-confident. Neither is she submissive. Celie describes her as:

She not quite as tall as Harpo but much bigger, and strong and ruddy looking, like her mama brought her up on pork. (31)

Celie first saw Sofia when she came to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_' house to ask permission to marry Harpo. She was eight or nine months pregnant but she was neither shy nor guilty. Very confidently she asks Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ for marrying Harpo. But Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ disapproved her. While Harpo was also sitting there he didn't take a stand in defence of Sofia. Neither had he taken the responsibility of fathering the child of Sofia. However, she didn't feel disheartened. She just stood and laughed a bit and said, "Harpo, you stay here. When you free, me and the baby be waiting" (32). This strength and confidence initially surprises Celie. She never had seen such a lady. Moreover her decisive nature enhanced her strength. Walker shows that men, though physically strong, are internally very weak. They are indecisive and unable to

cope up with contradictory situations. While women, though apparently weak are actually the stronger ones. Ready to face anything and everything that comes to them. When Sofia marries Harpo she comes to live with him. Initially Harpo wants to control and suppress Sofia. He asks Celie for some advice. Celie unthinkably replies "Beat her" (36). When Sofia comes to know of this she is shocked. She questions Celie why she gave such an advice? Celie realising her mistake replies:

I say it cause I'm a fool, I say. I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't. (39)

Sofia sympathises with Celie and this conversation becomes the stepping stone to their lifetime friendship. Sofia, too, tries to encourage Celie. She suggests that in this patriarchal society a woman needs to fight for herself if at all she wants her due rights and credits. She says :

All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. (39)

When Sofia suffered twelve years of harsh imprisonment at the Mayor's hand, Celie took stand for Sofia and blamed Harpo for Sofia's situation. She says, "If you hadn't tried to rule over Sofia the white folks never would have caught her" (181). Sofia also feels confident about herself because she has a strong support of her sisters at her back - specially Odessa, who even took care of Sofia's children when she was in jail. The theme of sisterhood can also be seen between Sofia and the Mayor's wife. Though the Mayor's wife was the cause of all Sofia's problems and tribulations, she herself becomes a sympathetic character when she is treated mechanically by her husband, the Mayor. The Mayor bought his wife, Miz Millie, a new car but never taught her how to drive it. She could only look at the car and cherish it, but not drive it. So finally she came to Sofia's assistance to learn, driving the car. Though both of them don't have any mutual feeling for one another, still the sense of lack or deprivation in Miz Millie brings her close to Sofia for some time.

Other miscellaneous examples of the bonding of sisterhood in the novel are the relations of Shug/Squeak; the Olinka women; Nettie/Corrine; and Tashi/Olivia. Squeak was Harpo's girlfriend, who had a craze for singing. But no one encouraged her. It was Shug Avery who motivated and boosted Squeak to sing in public. She gave her a chance at Harpo's juke-joint, where Shug used to sing weekly. Shug kept on enhancing Squeak's singing talent and along with giving time to time suggestions, brought a finesse in her singing. This helped Squeak to opt for a professional singing career and further explore herself.

Corrine was the lady who had adopted Celie's daughter, Olivia and son, Adam. Accidentally, Nettie in search of a job went to Corrine's house and was hired. Though, Nettie was hired for assistance to Corrine, Corrine never treated Nettie as someone subservient. She taught Nettie further, and enhanced her knowledge in every field of life. She called her 'sister', and kept Nettie with her throughout her life. Though some misunderstandings arose between them, they were finally resolved. So 'sisterhood' is apparent in Corrine and Nettie's relation too. Similarly there's a special and somewhat inconceivable sisterhood among the wives of the Olinka men also. The Olinka men used to follow polygamy. Though the wives weren't too much in contact with each other, otherwise, they came close to one another while the household chores or field-work. Nettie writes :

It is in work that the women get to know and care about each other. It was through work that Catherine [Tashi's mother] became friends with her husband's other wives. This friendship among women is something Samuel often talks about. Because the women share a husband but the husband does not share their friendships, it makes Samuel uneasy. (150)

The wives of one man having such close affinity among themselves, surprises as well as confuses Samuel. The bonding of sisters is somewhat inconceivable to men. The women actually 'empathise' with each other. This is the reason of their coming close and finding an

emotional security in one another. They empathise with each other because they all stand on the same plane – victimized in one or the other way.

Sisterhood is like a mirror for the female characters . . . reflecting each other's inner desires, life experiences and reformative power. It is in sisterhood that women are starting to recover their lost self identity. (HE 207)

Lastly, there's the simple and gullible bonding of Olivia, Nettie's niece, and Tashi, daughter of the Olinka woman, Catherine. Olivia, too makes efforts to teach Tashi whatever she knows (like Nettie used to teach Celie), because Tashi is her only friend in Africa. Moreover Tashi's parents are not interested in educating her, as she is a 'girl'. However Olivia gives her best to Tashi in order to make her smart and intelligent. This is also a beautiful example of sisterly bonding.

Thus 'sisterhood' depends on the solidarity of women and is not restricted to any familial bonding or biological determination. It is a simple willingness of a woman to care and help the other marginalized woman. 'Sisterhood' sometimes is also taken as retaliation or a fighting back against the domination and supremacy of men. However, this is a misinterpretation. Women form the bond of sisterhood not to defy someone else, but to upraise one's own 'self' and reconstruct one's identity.

Sisterhood provide[s] mutual help in time of difficulty and share dreams and secrets with affinitive understanding and a growing sense of self-identity. (HE 208-209)

It is a recreational bond. And this is what happens at the end of the novel. All the women materialize (turn concrete) their 'identities'. Moreover they haven't parted with the male characters. Only the relationships and the 'outlooks' have changed. The male-female relationships have been imparted a fresh perspective.

### Works Cited:

Hooks, Bell. "Writing the Subject: Reading *The Color Purple*". *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. New York:Meridian,1990.Print.

Jing,HE. "Sisterhood across Cultures – With Reference to Chen Ran's and Amy Tan's Fiction". *Intercultural Communication Studies*. XXI:2.2012:201-218. Web. 26 July 2014.

Walker, Alice.*The Color Purple*.London:Phoenix,2004.Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*.New York:Harcout Brace & Co.,1989.Print.

### Internet Sources

<https://www.poets.org> 26 July 2014

<https://womenshistory.about.com/od/alice-walker> 26 July 2014